Great poets of the 20th century

WH Auden

Foreword by Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury

No 2 in a series of 7

theguardian ff

WH Auden

Kirchstetten
6
Hinterholz

© The Estate of WH Auden.
Curtis Brown Ltd and the Estate of WH Auden from Collected Poems published by Faber and Faber at £25. To order a copy for the special price of £20, including UK p&p, call 0870 836 0875 or go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop.

Series editor Nicholas Wroe, Art director Gavin Brammall
Production editor Pas Paschali, Subeditor Dave Hall,
Picture editor Tracey Tomlin, Research Kate Abbott,
Production Darren Gavigan,
Rights manager Catherine Cronin

Illustration: John Spencer
Photograph: Harry Redl/Time Life Pictures/Getty

Printed by Polestar
Copyright © Guardian News & Media 2008

Interviews in this series:
1 TS Eliot, foreword by Craig Raine
2 WH Auden, foreword by Rowan Williams
3 Sylvia Plath, foreword by Margaret Drabble
4 Philip Larkin, foreword by Andrew Motion
5 Ted Hughes, foreword by Jeanette Winterson
6 Seamus Heaney, foreword by John Banville
7 Siegfried Sassoon, foreword by William Boyd
(No 5 appears in the Observer)

Produced by the Guardian
in association with Faber and Faber

guardian.co.uk/greatpoets

Foreword
Rowan Williams

Two things often said about great poets are that they create the taste by which they are appreciated, and that they have the capacity to constantly reinvent themselves. Auden illustrates these features perhaps more dramatically than any other of the great names of the 20th century. From his very earliest work (represented here by The Letter of 1927), he created a distinctive verbal landscape, tone and, especially in the early poems, a distinctive visual landscape as well. But, while some aspects of tone or register remain absolutely consistent, the landscape steadily expands with disciplined energy and, increasingly, with a particular skill in producing a sense of aphoristic solidity, a certain timelessness of perspective, unyielding, compassionate, distressingly honest at times.

Born in 1907, the third child of a doctor and his intensely intelligent and artistic wife, he was already writing and publishing serious, complex, authoritative poetry when an undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford. To his contemporaries, he had something of a mystique, and was widely seen as a guru in matters of poetic taste; that mystique survived through the 30s, when he and some of those most marked by his influence and friendship became an extraordinarily "iconic" presence in British cultural life. The fact that all of the group were in varying degrees involved in the tangled politics of the time, with strong affiliations to the communist cause, gave special force to this presence. Some of the poems of the 30s were instantly recognised as having a lasting and classical quality, like the unforgettable Lullaby.

So it was all the more startling, even shocking, when Auden left the UK not long before the outbreak of the second world war, and made his home in New York. The new context, and the impact of his deepest and longest-lasting sexual relationship, combined with a return to the High Church Anglican Christianity of his childhood to effect a marked change in both the style and scope of his work. Several very long and ambitious pieces deal with issues of art and politics and theology, guilt, love, creation and violence. He is more

than ever in his later work a "learned" poet, yet the combination of an intimidatingly erudite background with colloquial language, irony and unfailing emotional directness makes him very different from other poets who paint from a dense palette of historical and literary allusion. Somehow you don't simply respond by thinking, "inaccessible".

In his last years, personally none too happy, he moved around more between the USA and Europe, especially Austria, where he and his partner owned a house; and the poetry becomes just a little drier, with rather more pastiche and resort to condensed, formal or epigrammatic vehicles. But the intelligence is still unceasingly at work, more elegiac, sometimes more self-indulgent, often self-deflating. He died of a heart attack in his Austrian home in 1973.

The early poetry is full of what was to him the uniquely "authoritative" landscape of Pennine limestone, isolated communities, cold skies and deep-rooted, revengeful violence. This serves not as a backcloth for regional mythmaking, but as a set of framing metaphors for the social and political tragedy of the era. And, perhaps more importantly, for the sense of doubleness and loneliness, being suspicious and creating suspicion, that was bound up at this point in his life with Auden's homosexuality. The convoluted political context, with its rhetoric of covert operations, espionage and treachery, is inextricably connected with a muted but intensely felt sexual politics – of a very different kind from what we associate with the phrase in more recent decades. The poetic voice is often that of someone working as a kind of double agent or negotiating difficult border country. In what for some might seem a paradoxical development, the recovery of Christian belief and imagery allows for the poetry of hard but accepting self-awareness and a sense of absolution mysteriously granted in advance, and of an elusive but overwhelming order of joy to which the poem compulsively moves (Whitsunday in Kirchstetten).

The technical skill is always exceptional. You'd call it dazzling if it were not so all-pervading (if not unobtrusive, at least) apparently intrinsic to the poetic argument and energy. If I had to find one word for Auden's poetry, it might be "satisfying" – not remotely in the sense of comfortable, but full of that sense of creative necessity that poetry conveys when it is most itself: this is how it must be said, this is (borrowing Geoffrey Hill's language) a poetry of "atonement" where something is at the same time finished and set free in the fabric of the words.

WH Auden

The Letter

From the very first coming down
Into a new valley with a frown
Because of the sun and a lost way,
You certainly remain: to-day
I, crouching behind a sheep-pen, heard
Travel across a sudden bird,
Cry out against the storm, and found
The year's arc a completed round
And love's worn circuit re-begun,
Endless with no dissenting turn.
Shall see, shall pass, as we have seen
The swallow on the tile, spring's green
Preliminary shiver, passed
A solitary truck, the last
Of shunting in the Autumn. But now,
To interrupt the homely brow,
Thought warmed to evening through and through,
Your letter comes, speaking as you,
Speaking of much but not to come.

Nor speech is close nor fingers numb,
If love not seldom has received
An unjust answer, was deceived.
I, decent with the seasons, move
Different or with a different love,
Nor question overmuch the nod,
The stone smile of this country god
That never was more reticent,
Always afraid to say more than it meant.

Lullaby

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,

Find our mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.

As I Walked Out One Evening

As I walked out one evening
    Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
    Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
    I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
    "Love has no ending.

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
    Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
    And the salmon sing in the street,

"I'll love you till the ocean
    Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
    Like geese about the sky.

"The years shall run like rabbits,
    For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
    And the first love of the world."

But all the clocks in the city
    Began to whirr and chime:
"O let not Time deceive you,
    You cannot conquer Time.

"In the burrows of the Nightmare
    Where Justice naked is,

Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

"In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.

"Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.

"O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

"The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

"Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
And Jill goes down on her back.

"O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

"O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart."

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Law Like Love

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,
Law is the one
All gardeners obey
To-morrow, yesterday, to-day.

Law is the wisdom of the old,
The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;
The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,
Law is the senses of the young.

Law, says the priest with a priestly look,
Expounding to an unpriestly people,
Law is the words in my priestly book,
Law is my pulpit and my steeple.
Law, says the judge as he looks down his nose,
Speaking clearly and most severely,

Law is as I've told you before,
Law is as you know I suppose,
Law is but let me explain it once more,
Law is The Law.

Yet law-abiding scholars write:
Law is neither wrong nor right,
Law is only crimes
Punished by places and by times,
Law is the clothes men wear
Anytime, anywhere,
Law is Good-morning and Good-night.

Others say, Law is our Fate;
Others say, Law is our State;
Others say, others say
Law is no more,
Law has gone away.

And always the loud angry crowd,
Very angry and very loud,
Law is We,
And always the soft idiot softly Me.

If we, dear, know we know no more
Than they about the Law,
If I no more than you
Know what we should and should not do
Except that all agree
Gladly or miserably
That the Law is
And that all know this,
If therefore thinking it absurd
To identify Law with some other word,
Unlike so many men
I cannot say Law is again,
No more than they can we suppress
The universal wish to guess
Or slip out of our own position
Into an unconcerned condition.

Although I can at least confine
Your vanity and mine
To stating timidly
A timid similarity,
We shall boast anyway:
Like love I say.

Like love we don't know where or why,
Like love we can't compel or fly,
Like love we often weep,
Like love we seldom keep.

Law Like Love

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,
Law is the one
All gardeners obey
To-morrow, yesterday, to-day.

Law is the wisdom of the old,
The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;
The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,
Law is the senses of the young.

Law, says the priest with a priestly look,
Expounding to an unpriestly people,
Law is the words in my priestly book,
Law is my pulpit and my steeple.
Law, says the judge as he looks down his nose,
Speaking clearly and most severely,

Law is as I've told you before,
Law is as you know I suppose,
Law is but let me explain it once more,
Law is The Law.

Yet law-abiding scholars write:
Law is neither wrong nor right,
Law is only crimes
Punished by places and by times,
Law is the clothes men wear
Anytime, anywhere,
Law is Good-morning and Good-night.

Others say, Law is our Fate;
Others say, Law is our State;
Others say, others say
Law is no more,
Law has gone away.

And always the loud angry crowd,
Very angry and very loud,
Law is We,
And always the soft idiot softly Me.

If we, dear, know we know no more
Than they about the Law,
If I no more than you
Know what we should and should not do
Except that all agree
Gladly or miserably
That the Law is
And that all know this,
If therefore thinking it absurd
To identify Law with some other word,
Unlike so many men
I cannot say Law is again,
No more than they can we suppress
The universal wish to guess
Or slip out of our own position
Into an unconcerned condition.

Although I can at least confine
Your vanity and mine
To stating timidly
A timid similarity,
We shall boast anyway:
Like love I say.

Like love we don't know where or why,
Like love we can't compel or fly,
Like love we often weep,
Like love we seldom keep.

or its concomitant smile the worse
for being undeserved?

In the onion-tower overhead
bells clash at the Elevation, calling
on Austria to change: whether the world has improved
is doubtful, but we believe it could
and the divine Tiberius didn't. Rejoice, the bells
cry to me. Blake's Old Nobodaddy
in his astronomic telescopic heaven,
the Big White Christian upstairs, is dead,
and won't come hazing us no more, nor bless our bombs:
no more need sons of the menalty,
divining their future from plum-stones, count aloud
Army, Navy, Law, Church, nor a Prince
say who is *papabile*. (The Ape of the Living God
knows how to stage a funeral, though,
as penitents like it: Babel, like Sodom, still
has plenty to offer, though of course it draws
a better sort of crowd.) Rejoice: we who were born
congenitally deaf are able
to listen now to rank outsiders. The Holy Ghost
does not abhor a golfer's jargon,
a Lower-Austrian accent, the cadences even
of my own little anglo-american
musico-literary set (though difficult,
saints at least may think in algebra
without sin): but no sacred nonsense can stand Him.
Our magic syllables melt away,
our tribal formulae are laid bare: since this morning,
it is with a vocabulary
made wholesomely profane, open in lexicons
to our foes to translate, that we endeavor
each in his idiom to express the true *magnalia*
which need no hallowing from us, loaning terms,
exchanging graves and legends. (Maybe, when just now
Kirchstetten prayed for the dead, only I
remembered Franz Joseph the Unfortunate, who danced
once in eighty-six years and never
used the telephone.)

An altar-bell makes a noise
as the Body of the Second Adam
is shown to some of his torturers, forcing them
to visualise absent enemies
with the same right to grow hybrid corn and be wicked
as an Abendländer. As crows fly,
ninety kilometers from here our habits end,
where mine-field and watch-tower say NO EXIT
from peace-living Crimtartary, except for crows
and agents of peace: from Loipersbach
to the Bering Sea not a living stockbroker,
and church attendance is frowned upon
like visiting brothels (but the chess and physics
are still the same). We shall bury you
and dance at the wake, say her chiefs: that, says Reason,
is unlikely. But to most people
I'm the wrong color: it could be the looter's turn
for latrine-duty and the flogging-block,
my kin who trousered Africa, carried our smell
to germless poles.

Down a Gothic nave
comes our Pfarrer now, blessing the West with water:
we may go. There is no Queen's English
in any context for *Geist* or *Esprit*: about
catastrophe or how to behave in one
what do I know, except what everyone knows –
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.

Another Time

For us like any other fugitive,
Like the numberless flowers that cannot number
And all the beasts that need not remember,
It is to-day in which we live.

So many try to say Not Now,
So many have forgotten how
To say I Am, and would be
Lost, if they could, in history.

Bowing, for instance, with such old-world grace
To a proper flag in a proper place,
Muttering like ancients as they stump upstairs
Of Mine and His or Ours and Theirs.

Just as if time were what they used to will
When it was gifted with possession still,
Just as if they were wrong
In no more wishing to belong.

No wonder then so many die of grief,
So many are so lonely as they die;
No one has yet believed or liked a lie:
Another time has other lives to live.

Secrets

That we are always glad
When the Ugly Princess, parting the bushes
To find out why the woodcutter's children are happy,
Disturbs a hornets' nest, that we feel no pity
When the informer is trapped by the gang in a steam-room,
That we howl with joy
When the short-sighted Professor of Icelandic
Pronounces the Greek inscription
A Runic riddle which he then translates:

Denouncing by proxy our commonest fault as our worst;
That, waiting in his room for a friend,
We start so soon to turn over his letters,
That with such assurance we repeat as our own
Another's story, that, dear me, how often
We kiss in order to tell,
Defines precisely what we mean by love:—
To share a secret.

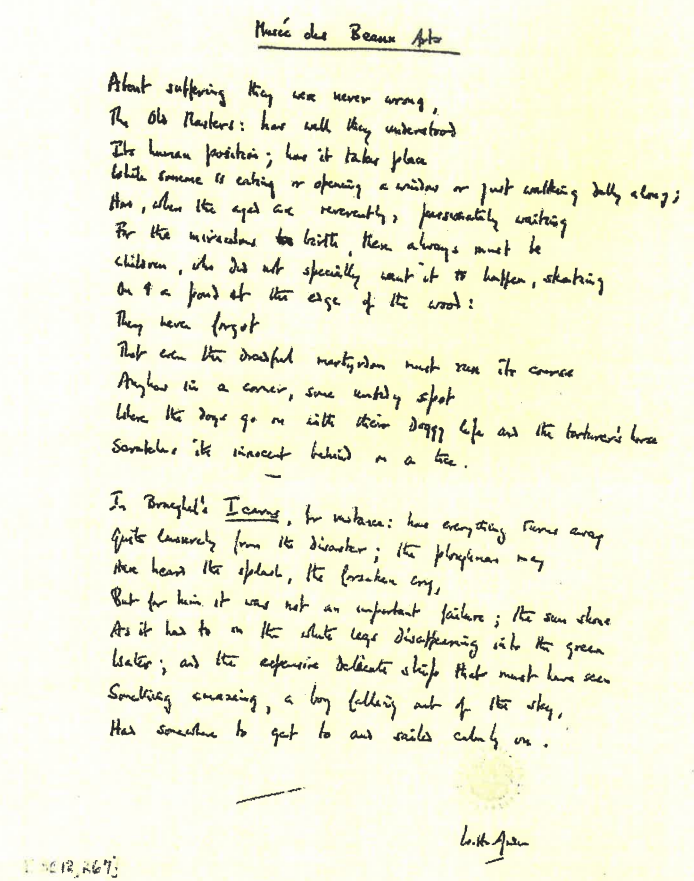
The joke, which we seldom see, is on us;
For only true hearts know how little it matters
What the secret is they keep:
An old, a new, a blue, a borrowed something,
Anything will do for children
Made in God's image and therefore
Not like the others, not like our dear dumb friends
Who, poor things, have nothing to hide,
Not, thank God, like our Father either
From whom no secrets are hid.

Whitsunday in Kirchstetten

(For H.A. Reinhold)

Grace dances. I would pipe. Dance ye all.
ACTS OF JOHN

Komm Schöpfer Geist I bellow as Herr Beer
picks up our slim offerings and Pfarrer Lustkandl
quietly gets on with the Sacrifice
as Rome does it: outside car-worshippers enact
the ritual exodus from Vienna
their successful cult demands (though reckoning time
by the Jewish week and the Christian year
like their pedestrian fathers). When Mass is over,
although obedient to Canterbury,
I shall be well-gruss-gotted, asked to contribute
to *Caritas*, though a metic come home
to lunch on my own land: no doubt, if the Allies had not
conquered the Ost-Mark, if the dollar fell,
the *Gemütlichkeit* would be less, but when was peace



Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

W.H. Auden

[illegible]

Facsimile manuscript of Musée Des Beaux Arts, 1938

From the Guardian and Observer archives

Experiments
"Poems" by W.H. Auden
(Faber and Faber)
December 14 1930

Mr. Auden is so steeped in solemnity and self-distrust that it is difficult to know whether he will ever shake himself free. He begins his book with what he calls "A Charade," a title which may be an apology for a story which appears to have been constructed by the nebulous actors in it. As against that there constantly breaks through in the "Poems" a bright thought veiled by indistinct utterance. It may be that the veils are a concession to his contemporaries. If so, the thought may yet throw off its strangling cloths and illumine by native grace.

Poetry in 1933
By Humbert Wolfe
December 31 1933

In the forefront we should place the group of young writers who have attracted, and deserve to attract, attention and expectation. Like the Georgian poets before them they are stronger as a group than as individuals, but individually at least two afford some basis for solid hope. These two are Mr. W.H. Auden and Mr. Stephen Spender, who have respectively published during the year, "Poems," "The Dance of Death," and "Poems." Mr. Auden has now three books of verse to his credit. It is difficult, at first sight, to say why he has excited such enthusiasm among his immediate contemporaries. He is not, in general, subject to the prevailing fashion of despair and formlessness. He does not write with his eye on a small and sneering group eager to pounce on the faintest concession to the normal human appetite for sense. He is, therefore, not in the mode – and that is the secret of his power. Mr. Auden is in touch with his own fire and his own belief. He is not ignorant of the past nor unspeculative about the future, but he is occupied primarily with the abundant present. He would not be a poet if he did not find much in it to hate; he would not be a young poet if he did not live in his own light, and direct it through his own bright lenses. And, as he continues honestly to study himself, he succeeds increasingly in interpreting the generation of which he is a part. For the proper study of mankind is not the general, but the particular man.

W.H. Auden
By Edwin Muir
Collected Shorter Poems (1930-1944) by W.H. Auden (Faber, 15s.)
April 30 1950

This volume is the first to give some idea of the scope and variety of Mr. Auden's poetry. The variety is remarkable, sometimes disconcerting. The scope is wide. Mr. Auden writes in every mood, uses any form and any vocabulary that comes to his hand, and invents where he can find none. The book accordingly contains a mass of poetry written on a surprising diversity of subjects, and in moods which range from the jocularity of the music-hall to high seriousness. There is nothing to give it unity but the author's cast of thought and imagination. Yet that is always perfectly recognisable.

The poems seem to be rather tumbled out in any order than arranged, and the reader has every now and then to change his mood in agreement with them. The student desiring to find a graph of Mr. Auden's development as a poet will not find it here. But that can be studied elsewhere by those who wish to do it.

The word "clinical" has often been applied to Mr. Auden's poetry. Yet the chief impression one has after reading this collection is of a tormented humanity. Certainly in his earlier work Mr. Auden seemed to be resolved to understand human beings by diagnosing and classifying them. Yet that seems to have been a short phase, and he soon passed to the more universal imaginative operation of understanding them for their own sakes. Diagnosis and classification are short-cuts: they reach a specific truth of their own which convinces a part of our mind, but only by leaving out the things which would convince us fully. The diagnosis and classification have gone. But Mr. Auden has still such a quickly moving imagination that he is still predisposed towards the short-cut, jumping the slow stages by which we reach an understanding of life.

The reader may feel somewhat hustled and disconcerted by the diversity of these poems. Perhaps they might have been more considerately arranged. But they are the work of an extraordinary poet.

The Guardian Archive is available as an online subscription at guardian.co.uk/archive